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THE MISPLACED LINES, *PIERS PLOWMAN*
(A) V, 236-41

In the July number of *Modern Philology* (p. 61) Professor Manly dismisses rather summarily my suggestion (in the *Modern Language Review*, October, 1908, p. 1), repeated independently by Professor Brown, that the importunate passage belongs to the confession of Robert the Robber. "If Robert had not 'wherwith,'" he urges, "of what avail would be his conditional promise of restitution?"

It is true the language of the interpolated passage is not quite consistent with the original confession. In that, Robert is made to say that he had "noght wherof," and despaired of gaining the means of restitution. Here, he expresses his willingness to "yelde again," and seems confident of being able to do so. Nay more, he anticipates a "residue and a remnaunt," out of which he hopes to defray the expenses of a pilgrimage to Rome. All this would perhaps better fit Coveitise—whose ill-gotten gains form the main subject of that sinner's confession. But there is no place for it there. Is it not worth considering whether the lines in question may not be a kind of afterthought—prompted by a sense of the grave defect of penitence unaccompanied by works meet thereto? The Robber may learn to make an honest livelihood, and then not only "restitution" but even a pilgrimage may become possible. This is to some extent supported by what follows about his "leping over land" with his "polished pike."

Anyhow the lines in question are no more fitted to form part of the confession of Wrath than of that of Sloth. To what confession then do they belong? The rest of the Seven Deadly Sins have already been treated. Moreover they distinctly deal with the sin of dishonesty, the two main forms of which are (1) dishonest trading and (2) theft with violence or robbery. The former of these has been fully disposed of under Coveitise; there remains only the latter, exemplified in Robert, to whose confession I have suggested they may be regarded as an addition.

The supposition of a lost leaf is not perhaps in itself improbable. Unfortunately it leaves the lines in question still altogether unexplained. Each of the Sins has so far been represented by a single penitent; it is altogether improbable that the sin of dishonesty—a manifestation of the deadly inner principle of Coveitise—should have claimed two. This fag-end of a confession is thus left wholly without probable attachment!

Perhaps another solution of the problem is possible. If we accept the story of the early death of the author of the Vision, as told in Pass. xii (Skeat)—which Dr. Skeat, holding strongly the one-author theory, is led to regard as emblematical only—we may perhaps look upon the misplacement as simply due to unskilful editing. The author may have left the passage in a detached form, intending to incorporate it, with due adjustment, in the confession either of the Robber or of Coveitise, when he was suddenly struck down by “fever”—perhaps the plague. Supposing this to have been the case, it would be no matter for surprise if a perplexed editor should have dumped it down in a place where its irrelevance is not at once apparent.

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